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## Our Lovely Horse

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**Our Lovely Horse: questions regarding the origin and possible prehistoric chronology of the extinct Irish Hobby breed of horse.**

Ireland may be the land of saints and scholars for the most part of the Early Medieval period, but the bits and Y-pieces found within Iron Age contexts across the island declare it as a land which has had a long term love affair with the horse. Yet we know almost nothing of the breeds present here in any phase of our prehistory. Modern Ireland has few indigenous breeds, with only the Connemara, Irish Draft and Kerry Bog Pony extant, all of which trace their origins to Medieval and Post-Medieval periods. The standards of conformation which we accept today are very much constructions of the 19th century – old images of the breeds bear little resemblance to today's equines. The past was more diverse, with breeds such as the Roscommon pony, the Cushendall cob, the Rathlin pony and the Irish Hobby, all extinct or bred out.

The Irish Hobby has been considered the most likely candidate for the indigenous prehistoric horse of Ireland. It was so well established as an animal of value during the Medieval period that Edward I of England obtained six of them for his own use (Lydon, 1954, 13), and medieval documents sing their praises for speed and intelligence. The English cavalry of the late 13th century defined their light cavalry as 'hobellarii', describing how Ireland "produces excellent horses which the inhabitants call Ubinos or Hobinos" (Morris, 1914, 80).

The Irish style of riding, almost certainly originating in late antiquity was extremely intuitive, relying on the maintenance of a strong seat without help from stirrups. The first thing the 12<sup>th</sup> century chieftain O'Conchabair did was to remove the saddle from King John's gift of a heavy Norman destrier and ride alongside him bareback (Duffy, 1996, 11). The Hobbey is recorded in numerous sources as being a pacing animal, so this style of riding would be eminently suitable to such a creature.

Most horses have four gaits – walk, trot, canter and gallop, and all of these involve the animal moving its legs diagonally. The fifth gait is unusual and distinctive in that a horse or pony moves alternating lateral (same side) pairs of legs together. This is achieved by shifting weight from side to side, away from each advancing pair of legs. This is best demonstrated by modern Icelandic ponies, who are often raced recreationally using this visually dramatic gait.

There are no known images of horses dating to the late prehistoric period in Ireland; most of what we know pertains to the Early Medieval period. Carvings of horse drawn vehicles such as those on the Clonmacnoise High Cross of the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD show fine-boned animals in motion with no indication of a fifth gait. However, this distinctive pace is observed on breedier little animals, carved into the enigmatic Pictish stones of Scotland, which date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD . Some animals are depicted with normal gaits, such as the Edderton stone, in Scottish Highlands, while others, like the equestrian figures at Meigle, Strathmore or the Hilton of Cadboll stone in Ross-Shire (8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century AD) are

depicted unmistakably pacing suggesting perhaps a mixture of breeds or training methods dependant on function.

Regular communications between Ireland and Scotland during the Early Medieval period would certainly account for the presence of the Irish Hobbey at this period of time in Scotland and Britain, but equally opens the question if the Hobbey was Irish at all, and came from Scandinavian influences from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The ancestors of the Icelandic, Lofoten and Fjord ponies would have been bought, sold and exchanged across most western regions of Europe as the Vikings extended their trade networks. Recent genetic research has indicated there is a pacing gene, which has been theorised to be the result of Viking selective breeding programmes from the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards, based on a somewhat small sample size of 90 equine bone assemblages (Wutke *et al.*, 2016), yet we know there were horses in prehistoric Ireland, long before the arrival of the 'raid and trade' Viking culture. Could the Irish Hobbey have its roots -or hooves - firmly in prehistory rather than the Early Medieval period?

Amidst all the breath-taking splendour of the iconic artefacts on display at the Celts Exhibition, which has been on tour in both the British Museum in London and the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh during 2016, there is a small and inconspicuous little equestrian figurine in a cabinet, not much bigger than 8 or 9 cm in height. It was found in Norton Disney, on the boundary of Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, depicting a martial figure on a small, lightweight horse, and may represent Mars, or a typical fusion of a

regional pre-Roman deity with some member of the Roman pantheon. It likely dates therefore to between AD 50 and AD 200.

Most people will look past this little figure dazzled by the plethora of gold, silver and exquisitely designed swirls and scrolls of the various La Tène and La Tène-derivative styles. Yet, it hints at something very interesting. The little horse which the warrior straddles is a proud creature, with an arched neck and an exaggerated stepping action, not unlike a modern Hackney trot. Yet looking at the rest of its limbs, it is pacing. The hind leg is on the same side as the leading foreleg, captured almost in full, energetic and vital tölt. It is perhaps one of the earliest images of a pacing horse.

Could this be an early representation of a Hobbey-type animal? It is very possible, and feasible that the Hobbey was a type rather than a breed, once present perhaps under slightly different names and variations across these islands. Wutke's team of geneticists omitted any scrutiny of artistic depictions of horses from the end of the Iron Age and into the Early Medieval period, such as this figure (and others like it recorded in the Portable Antiquities Scheme in Britain), or the Pictish stones, which show clearly a variety of gaits, all accurately recorded by people who lived with and employed horses every day of their lives.

The last known full-bred Cushendall cob, a mare called Blondie, was a working horse in Belfast during the 1950s and 1960s. She was known to perform an (unsolicited) exaggerated pacing action when happy and relaxed, causing much delight to pedestrians in the city. Her

photograph shows an animal typologically similar to the endangered ancient breed of the Scottish Eriskay, though slightly larger and heavier. If we shelve our ideas of modern breed characteristics, and instead focus on what our ancestors wanted from their steeds – hunting, recreation, status, warfare, agriculture - then the little figure from Norton Disney may indeed show a permutation of the Hobbey type, telling us something of those long-dead native ponies of the Iron Age in Ireland and Britain.

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